

Feminist Theory

Common Threads in Feminist Theory

Gender Roles:

In all feminist theory gender roles are central. Most (but not all) Feminist theorists believe that these gender roles are social constructions (i.e. learned) and therefore men can acquire some of the behavioral characteristics identified with the female gender (by the same token, some women can mimic some of the male gender roles). There are some Feminist theorists (a minority) who believe the differences between men and women are not learned but "hard-wired" genetically in hormonal differences and even cognitive processes. (One can also envision a combination where some characteristics are learned, some are "hard-wired" into men and women). But all feminists believe that the academic world of International Relations, the political world, and the business world are all dominated by males and the male gender perspective.

It is important then to understand some of these gender role differences. According to Feminist Theory, the female gender perspective emphasizes cooperative-collective action which meets group needs while the male gender is more likely to view problems as competitions for power and vie for control of the decision-making. Women are about the group and cooperation; men are about the individual. There are differences in policy priorities as well. The female gender is more focused on basic human needs (shelter, food, health care, education) while the male gender is more martial in nature with a focus on military security and acquisition and conquest.

Finally, there are differences in perception and decision-making. The male gender perspective is more inclined to think in linear, rationalistic, Aristotelian fashion in solving a problem. Men are more inclined to seek a technological, institutional, or economic solution to the problem. From the male perspective, often problem-solving can be translated into a step-by-step problem-solving procedure. One can (and should) separate "facts" from "values". The female cognitive processes operate differently. In the first place, it does not really view coping with world issues as "problem solving" (which has mathematical overtones) but about meeting needs. From the feminist perspective, intuitive "right-brain" thinking must be combined with more rational "left brain" processes. It is impossible therefore to solve problems by translating them into a step-by-step problem-solving procedure. And facts can not be totally separated from values. From the feminist perspective, issues must be viewed in a context. In contrast, men believe that issues can viewed as discrete problems that can be solved in isolation.

Patriarchy: The Matrix: For Feminists, the ubiquitous virus is patriarchy. Patriarchy is the universal dominance of the male gender perspective in all important societal institutions and a system which keeps men in all positions of power. Feminists believe that women are exploited (literally treated as "property" or "sexual objects") through patriarchy. Feminists believe that religion, cultural institutions (the media), educational institutions, economic systems, and governmental rules are all designed to keep patriarchy in place. For example, all monotheistic religions and many polytheistic religions grant men "God Ordained" positions of leadership. Because of the differences in gender roles, all feminists believe that more women should be included in politics, business, and the academic world. There are glass ceilings in all perspectives that must be broken. But it is much more than simply about placing women in positions of power; one must eliminate the underlying virus of patriarchy. Women will not cease to be exploited until there are fundamental cultural and institutional changes that eliminate patriarchy and replace this power matrix with a matriarchal system guided by the female gender perspective. Note: since most feminists believe that gender roles are learned then this does NOT mean that men could not exercise positions of power within this new, more egalitarian matriarchal system.

Characteristics of a Feminist Approach

Excerpt from Barbara F. McManus, *Classics and Feminism: Gendering the Classics* (New York: Twayne, 1997), 58-60:

Feminist scholars differentiate sex from gender and view the latter as a socially/culturally constructed category. Gender is learned and performed; it involves the myriad and often normative meanings given to sexual difference by various cultures. Feminists may differ in the importance they assign to sex, which is a biologically based category, but the idea that gender norms can be changed is central to feminist theory.

Although sex/gender systems differ cross-culturally, most known societies have used and still use sex/gender as a key structural principle organizing their actual and conceptual worlds, usually to the disadvantage of women. Hence feminist scholars argue that gender is a crucial category of analysis and that modes of knowledge which do not take gender into account are partial and incomplete.

Feminist scholars also seek to question and transform androcentric (masculine “men” oriented) systems of thought which posit the male as the norm. In practice this means not only revealing and critiquing androcentric biases, but also attempting to examine beliefs and practices from the viewpoint of the “other,” treating women and other marginalized groups as subjects, not merely objects.

Feminists believe that existing inequalities between dominant and marginalized groups can and should be removed. Therefore feminist scholarship has an acknowledged and accepted political dimension, as opposed to the hidden political dimension of scholarship that claims to be “neutral” and “objective.” Although the commitment to feminist politics and organized feminist movements will not be equally stressed in all pieces of scholarship, it will never be denied or criticized (if it is, I would say that the approach is not feminist no matter what the author may claim). With regard to scholarship, the political goal of feminist work is broader than simply a stronger emphasis on women, though that is an important part of it; the goal is to revise our way of considering history, society, literature, etc. so that neither male nor female is taken as normative, but both are seen as equally conditioned by the gender constructions of their culture (as indeed we, the observers, are).

Feminism

Feminist literary criticism, arising in conjunction with sociopolitical feminism, critiques patriarchal language and literature by exposing how these reflect masculine ideology. It examines gender politics in works and traces the subtle construction of masculinity and femininity, and their relative status, positionings, and marginalizations within works.

Beyond making us aware of the marginalizing uses of traditional language (the presumptuousness of the pronoun “he,” or occupational words such as “*mailman*”) feminists focused on language have noticed a stylistic difference in women’s writing: women tend to use reflexive constructions more than men (e.g., “She found herself crying”). They have noticed that women and men tend to communicate differently: men directed towards solutions, women towards connecting.

Feminist criticism concerns itself with stereotypical representations of genders. It also may trace the history of relatively unknown or undervalued women writers, potentially earning them their rightful place within the literary canon, and helps create a climate in which women’s creativity may be fully realized and appreciated.

One will frequently hear the term “patriarchy” used among feminist critics, referring to traditional male-dominated society. “Marginalization” refers to being forced to the outskirts of what is considered socially and politically significant; the female voice was traditionally marginalized, or discounted altogether.

Feminist criticism is concerned with "...the ways in which literature (and other cultural productions) reinforce or undermine the economic, political, social, and psychological oppression of women" (Tyson). This school of theory looks at how aspects of our culture are inherently patriarchal (male dominated) and "...this critique strives to expose the explicit and implicit misogyny in male writing about women" (Richter 1346). This misogyny, Tyson reminds us, can extend into diverse areas of our culture: "Perhaps the most chilling example...is found in the world of modern medicine, where drugs prescribed for both sexes often have been tested on male subjects only".

Feminist criticism is also concerned with less obvious forms of marginalization such as the exclusion of women writers from the traditional literary canon: "...unless the critical or historical point of view is feminist, there is a tendency to under-represent the contribution of women writers" (Tyson 82-83).

Common Space in Feminist Theories

Though a number of different approaches exist in feminist criticism, there exist some areas of commonality. This list is excerpted from Tyson:

1. Women are oppressed by patriarchy economically, politically, socially, and psychologically; patriarchal ideology is the primary means by which they are kept so
2. In every domain where patriarchy reigns, woman is other: she is marginalized, defined only by her difference from male norms and values
3. All of western (Anglo-European) civilization is deeply rooted in patriarchal ideology, for example, in the biblical portrayal of Eve as the origin of sin and death in the world
4. While biology determines our sex (male or female), culture determines our gender (masculine or feminine)
5. All feminist activity, including feminist theory and literary criticism, has as its ultimate goal to change the world by prompting gender equality
6. Gender issues play a part in every aspect of human production and experience, including the production and experience of literature, whether we are consciously aware of these issues or not (91).

Feminist criticism has, in many ways, followed what some theorists call the three waves of feminism:

1. **First Wave Feminism** - late 1700s-early 1900's: writers like Mary Wollstonecraft (*A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, 1792) highlight the inequalities between the sexes. Activists like Susan B. Anthony and Victoria Woodhull contribute to the women's suffrage movement, which leads to National Universal Suffrage in 1920 with the passing of the Nineteenth Amendment
2. **Second Wave Feminism** - early 1960s-late 1970s: building on more equal working conditions necessary in America during World War II, movements such as the National Organization for Women (NOW), formed in 1966, cohere feminist political activism. Writers like Simone de Beauvoir (*Le deuxième sexe*, 1972) and Elaine Showalter established the groundwork for the dissemination of feminist theories dove-tailed with the American Civil Rights movement
3. **Third Wave Feminism** - early 1990s-present: resisting the perceived essentialist (over generalized, over simplified) ideologies and a white, heterosexual, middle class focus of second wave feminism, third wave feminism borrows from post-structural and contemporary gender and race theories (see below) to expand on marginalized populations' experiences. Writers like Alice Walker work to "...reconcile it [feminism] with the concerns of the black community...[and] the survival and wholeness of her people, men and women both, and for the promotion of dialog and community as well as for the valorization of women and of all the varieties of work women perform" (Tyson 97).

Typical questions:

- How is the relationship between men and women portrayed?
- What are the power relationships between men and women (or characters assuming male/female roles)?
- How are male and female roles defined?
- What constitutes masculinity and femininity?
- How do characters embody these traits?
- Do characters take on traits from opposite genders? How so? How does this change others' reactions to them?
- What does the work reveal about the operations (economically, politically, socially, or psychologically) of patriarchy?
- What does the work imply about the possibilities of sisterhood as a mode of resisting patriarchy?
- What does the work say about women's creativity?
- What does the history of the work's reception by the public and by the critics tell us about the operation of patriarchy?
- What role the work play in terms of women's literary history and literary tradition? (Tyson)